

What is claimed is:

1. An Electronic Document Answering Machine comprising:

a CPU and memory connected by a communication bus;

5 a modem connected to the bus for communicating on a telephone line;

an announcement system for communicating stored documents to a user;

an alert apparatus for signaling a user that new documents are waiting to be reviewed; and

10 an input device for a user to signal the system to communicate the new documents to the user;

wherein the CPU, executing stored control code, periodically connects to remote sources over the modem, downloads and stores digital documents in portions of the memory, and activates the alert apparatus as new documents are stored, and wherein the CPU in response to input from a user via the input device, communicates stored documents one-at-a-time to the user .

2. The Electronic Document Answering Machine of claim 1 wherein the announcement system comprises a speaker and voice synthesis apparatus.

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3. The Electronic Document Answering Machine of claim 1 wherein the announcement system comprises a display apparatus.

4. The Electronic Document Answering Machine of claim 1 additionally comprising a serial port for connecting to a host personal computer (PC), wherein the Electronic Document Answering Machine is adapted to communicate stored documents to the PC for processing.

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5. The Electronic Document Answering Machine of claim 4 adapted for use by the PC as a modem.

5 6. The Electronic Document Answering Machine of claim 1 wherein the modem is operated by the CPU and has no separate CPU.

7. The Electronic Document Answering Machine as in claim 1 wherein the remote sources include an Internet mail server, and downloaded documents include e-mail addressed to a particular user.

10 8. The Electronic Document Answering Machine of claim 1 wherein the alert apparatus is an LED and the input apparatus is a pushbutton having the LED integrated in the pushbutton.

15 9. The Electronic Document Answering Machine of claim 8 further comprising a second pushbutton adapted for applying and removing power to power-using elements of the Machine.

20 10. An Electronic Document Answering System in a personal computer (PC), comprising:

a retriever adapted for periodically retrieving and storing digital documents over a telephone line;

an alert apparatus for signaling a user that one or more new documents have been retrieved and stored and are ready for review; and

25 an initializing input for a user to signal the system to communicate the stored documents one-at-a-time for review by the user;

wherein the system is adapted to operate using CPU and memory elements of the PC with special operating code provided for the system, and

to operate during periods of time the PC is in reduced-power power as well as when the PC is in full operating mode.

5 11. The system of claim 10 wherein the digital documents include e-mail addressed to the PC user.

12. The system of claim 10 wherein the alert apparatus is an LED and the input apparatus is a pushbutton having the LED integrated in the pushbutton.

10 13. The system of claim 12 wherein the alert apparatus and the pushbutton are in a keyboard in communication with the PC.

15 14. The system of claim 13 wherein the alert apparatus is an LED in a standard keyboard adapted to serve as the alert apparatus, and the input apparatus is a standard key on the keyboard adapted to serve as the pushbutton.

15. An Electronic Document Answering Machine for use with a TV set, comprising:

20 a CPU and memory connected by a communication bus;
a modem connected to the bus for communicating on a telephone line;
an alert apparatus for signaling a user that new documents are waiting to be reviewed;

an audio/video output port connected to the bus; and
25 an infra-red port for receiving infra-red signals from a remote controller;

wherein the CPU, executing stored control code, periodically connects to remote sources over the modem, downloads and stores digital documents in portions of the memory, and activates the alert apparatus as new documents

are stored, and wherein the CPU in response to input from a user via the infra-red port, communicates stored documents one-at-a-time to a TV set via the audio/video output port.

- 5 16. The Electronic Document Answering Machine of claim 13 wherein the remote sources include Internet servers, and digital documents include e-mail and WEB pages downloaded from the Internet servers.